



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT MARKS TENTH ANNIVERSARY

One of the world's strongest conservation laws, the U.S. Endangered Species Act, will be 10 years old on December 28. The decade since its passage has witnessed unprecedented efforts on behalf of endangered and threatened species, the refinement of complex government processes required to implement the law, and encouraging improvement in the status of some unique native animals and plants.

"Perhaps the most significant achievements of the Endangered Species Act are that it focused public attention on these species and established a workable government mechanism to bring about their recovery," says Interior Secretary William Clark. "Although we still face many difficult problems, the law has enabled some species to make significant progress toward recovery."

One of the best known endangered species, the whooping crane, has benefited from years of intensive research. This year, a bumper crop of eggs increased whooper numbers to 148, up from 15 in 1941. Biologists found a record number of nests--23--in the wild flock at Canada's Wood Buffalo National Park. The wild flock now numbers 78. The captive flock at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland also increased this year to 34. To establish a second wild whooper flock, some eggs and chicks from the wild and captive flocks are taken to Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Idaho, where they are reared by "foster-parent" sandhill cranes. This year the translocation program added 19 chicks to the 14 older whoopers already in the Grays Lake flock. Three other whoopers are in captivity at the San Antonio Zoo and the International Crane Foundation in Wisconsin.

The fortunes of the Aleutian Canada goose are also improving. This smaller cousin of the familiar Canada goose declined after Arctic foxes were introduced to its nesting habitat in the Aleutian Islands. To help the geese recover, FWS biologists bred them in captivity and began removing the foxes from their nesting areas. Captive-born geese were returned to the wild and protected from hunting while on their California and Oregon wintering grounds. In 1983, the number of wild Aleutian Canadas stood at about 3,500, up from 800 as recently as 1975. Fifteen of the geese were shipped to Japan this fall so that country may begin reestablishing the species there.

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The Delmarva fox squirrel, one of the first mammals to be listed as endangered, is more numerous and occurs in more places now than in 1973. In cooperation with FWS, biologists from Maryland and Virginia wildlife agencies have translocated the large, silver-gray squirrels to reestablish breeding populations of the squirrel in areas where it used to occur. Experts say the translocated squirrels are doing well, and their new homes provide plenty of habitat to allow them to increase their numbers.

As recently as 1981, some people feared the black-footed ferret might be extinct. Then the discovery of a single ferret, apparently killed by a dog, led biologists to a wild ferret colony. Eighty-eight ferrets were counted this year around 18 Wyoming prairie dog towns. FWS biologists are putting radio transmitters on some ferrets and tracking them to learn more about them.

Biologists are beginning to see some hope for the rare California condor. The condor's decline has halted for the first time in several decades, and the birds now number about 20 in the wild and 9 in captivity. Scientists hope to breed captive condors and release their offspring to bolster the wild population. Meanwhile, researchers have attached radio transmitters to wild condors and are tracking them to learn more about their behavior and habitat needs. Already the studies have led to the identification of key condor habitat, and steps are being taken to preserve the land.

Several western trout--California's Paiute cutthroat, Colorado's greenback cutthroat, and Arizona's Apache trout--were reclassified from "endangered" to the less severe "threatened" status during the 1970's as a result of habitat restoration, elimination of introduced, competing trout species, and hatchery rearing and restocking programs. Similar efforts are underway for the Gila topminnow, which is being reared at Dexter National Fish Hatchery in New Mexico and reintroduced to native Arizona waters. Other endangered fish are also reared at Dexter.

The recovery of the bald eagle marked another milestone this year when an eaglet hatched in Tennessee for the first time since 1961. To speed the eagle's recovery from the detrimental effects of DDT on its reproduction, the birds are bred in captivity at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center and released in States where eagle numbers remain low. Eagles are also translocated from areas where they are relatively abundant to States where they are scarce. In 1983, this translocation effort became international when Canada donated 22 eaglets for release in the northeastern United States.

DDT took such a heavy toll of the American peregrine falcon that it no longer nested east of the Mississippi River. But with the assistance of State and Federal wildlife agencies, the Peregrine Fund, and falconers, peregrines have been bred in captivity and their offspring returned to the wild. Since 1975, nearly 1,000 peregrines have been released, and peregrines are once again nesting in habitat where none had nested for 30 years.

Pesticide restrictions and efforts to protect its nesting areas have helped the brown pelican increase since the mid-1970's, and this year FWS proposed to remove the species from the endangered list in several Eastern States. In Louisiana, whose own nesting pelican population had been eliminated by pesticides, about 300 pelicans are now present as a result of translocations of pelicans from Florida.

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Perhaps the most remarkable comeback has been made by the American alligator. Under strict Federal and State protection, alligators have increased and are no longer endangered in Texas and Louisiana. Most estimates place the total U.S. alligator population at more than 2 million.

Beyond successes for individual species, the Endangered Species Act has achieved broader objectives. The law embraces not only mammals, birds, and other vertebrates, but plants and creatures without backbones such as insects, crustaceans, and mollusks. Many scientists regard this protection for the natural diversity of life as one of the law's most progressive and important features.

Near San Francisco, California, 55 acres have been acquired and preserved as a national wildlife refuge for the endangered Lange's metalmark butterfly and two plants that have been featured on postage stamps--the Antioch Dunes evening primrose and the Contra Costa wallflower. The three species exist on remnant dunes that were formerly mined for sand. Establishment of the refuge prevented further development of their habitat, removed off-road vehicles, and helped to control pedestrian traffic. An adjacent parcel of the species' habitat is maintained by the Pacific Gas and Electric Company, whose biologists work with FWS to conserve the rare species.

One of the law's purposes is to conserve the ecosystems on which endangered and threatened species depend. A desert wetland at Ash Meadows, Nevada, for example, supports two fishes listed as endangered as well as seven plants and one insect that have been proposed for listing. Until recently, the species' survival was threatened by construction of a housing development. Now Congress has appropriated funds to preserve this unique area as a national wildlife refuge.

Another major accomplishment has been the successful involvement of State and Federal agencies in endangered species conservation. For example, thousands of consultations have taken place between FWS and other Federal agencies under a provision of the law designed to prevent Federal projects from jeopardizing the survival of endangered species.

Of course, not all the news about endangered species is encouraging. The number of species listed as endangered or threatened continues to grow, from 400 when the law was passed to 783 currently. So far in 1983, 23 species have been listed and 66 more proposed for addition to the list. And for some species, the law may have come too late. This year the Santa Barbara song sparrow, the blue pike, and the longjaw cisco were removed from the endangered list. All are believed to have been extinct for more than a decade. No one is certain whether the Caribbean monk seal or the ivory-billed woodpecker still survive. Other species continue to exist in low numbers or limited habitats.

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"One of the greatest obstacles to saving many species is our lack of knowledge about them," Clark observes. "But biologists have learned a great deal in the past 10 years, and these advances will continue. In addition, international efforts to control trade in rare species, law enforcement, and recovery programs are advancing. As a result of the Endangered Species Act, the odds for many U.S. species are better today than they were 10 years ago."

-- FWS-51 --

Editors: Black and white prints and color slides of endangered species are available on free loan by calling the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Office of Audio-Visual, (202) 343-8770.

TV Broadcasters: A limited number of composite 3/4-inch video cassettes with stock footage of species mentioned in this article and others are available on free loan by calling the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Office of Audio-Visual, (202) 343-8770.

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